

What the Hands Remember

"This endless mercy mile

We're crawling side by side

With hell freezing over in our eyes

Gods kneel before our crime."

HIM - Wings of a Butterfly

Est

The apartment was quiet in the way it got after guests left—the particular silence that came from space that had recently held voices and laughter and the warmth of other people's presence. Tui and Hong had been gone for hours, but I could still feel the echo of them in the arrangement of cushions, the empty coffee cups waiting to be washed, the lingering sense that I hadn't been alone.

The painting watched from my desk. My hands, rendered in gray and blue, cradling a rose that seemed to glow even in the evening light. And the letter waited beside it. Still patient. Still full of words I wasn't sure I wanted to read.

I'd told myself I would wait. Tomorrow, maybe. Or the day after. When I was ready, when I felt strong enough to face whatever William had written without being pulled backward into the storm I'd worked so hard to escape. But the truth was, I'd been ready for hours. The readiness had been building since the moment I'd opened the box and seen those familiar hands—my hands—rendered with a care that spoke of attention I hadn't known I was receiving.

The painting proved William was paying attention. It proved I mattered. And that was both healing and devastating—because mattering wasn't enough to make William capable of a real relationship. Mattering hadn't stopped him from pushing me away, from screaming at me in his studio, from letting silence stretch between us until it felt like a wall too high to climb.

What could words offer that the painting didn't?

I made myself tea—chamomile this time, for the particular anxiety that came with anticipation. Watched the dried flowers unfurl in hot water, their petals spreading like something remembering how to open. Let the ritual ground me in the present moment, in the physical reality of warmth in my hands and fragrance in the air.

Then I sat at my table, across from the painting, and opened the letter.

Est,

I don't know if you'll read this. I don't know if you should. But I needed to try—

needed to say things I should have said months ago, before everything fell apart.

I'm sorry.

Those two words feel inadequate for everything I put you through. For the breakdown you witnessed. For the way I screamed at you to leave. For the silence afterward—the messages I didn't send, the calls I didn't make, the space I let grow between us until it felt insurmountable.

The handwriting was William's—that distinctive slant, those particular loops—but steadier than I remembered. More careful. The handwriting of someone who had thought about every word before committing it to paper. I kept reading.

I was drowning, and instead of letting you throw me a rope, I pulled you under with me. That wasn't fair. That wasn't right. That was the thing I'd been afraid of all along—that my darkness would spread to everyone who got too close.

I'm not asking for forgiveness. I'm not asking for anything. I just needed you to know that I see, now, what I couldn't see then. That the problem was never you. The problem was me—my fear, my isolation, my inability to believe that someone might actually want to stay. You stayed. You tried to stay. And I pushed you away because staying meant being seen, and being seen meant being vulnerable, and vulnerability meant the possibility of loss. I thought if I pushed first, the loss would hurt less.

It didn't.

I set the letter down. Took a breath. The words were landing in my chest like small stones, each one finding its place in the complicated geography of what I'd felt and what I was feeling now. He wasn't making excuses. He was explaining. There was a difference—I could hear it in the way the sentences were constructed, the way he acknowledged harm without trying to minimize it. This wasn't the William who had been too consumed by his own drowning to see what he was doing to others. This was someone who had surfaced long enough to look back and recognize the wake of damage behind him.

I picked up the letter again.

The painting is something I made during the worst of it. When I couldn't leave my apartment, couldn't face the world, couldn't do anything except create. I painted your hands because I couldn't stop thinking about them—the way you held your camera, the way you gestured when you talked, the way they shook slightly when you were nervous. I painted them over and over until I could see them with my eyes closed.

I'm not saying this to make you uncomfortable. I'm saying it because I want you to know that even when I was at my worst, even when I was pushing everyone away, I

was also paying attention. I was also seeing you. The real you—not the version I was afraid of, but the version that existed.

My throat tightened. Not with sadness, exactly—something more complicated. The particular ache of being seen by someone who wasn't able to do anything with what they saw. All those weeks of wondering if I'd imagined the connection. All those hours of doubt, of asking myself if what I felt was one-sided, if William had ever really noticed me beyond my usefulness as a distraction from his grief. And here it was—proof that he'd been watching. That my hands had mattered enough to be rendered in paint. That somewhere beneath his chaos, he'd been paying attention in ways I hadn't known.

It didn't fix anything. But it filled a gap I hadn't realized was empty.

The flowers are from Lego's shop. He said you might appreciate something unusual—something that doesn't look like what you'd expect, but is beautiful in its own way.

That's what you are, Est. Beautiful in your own way. I'm sorry it took me so long to say it.

I laughed then—a wet sound, half-choked with the tears I was trying not to shed. Of course Lego had helped. Of course the boy who built fortresses of soft things had been consulted on how to reach across the distance William had created. It was so perfectly, impossibly Lego—present at every healing, facilitating every connection, carrying weight that wasn't his to carry because someone had to and no one else was stepping up.

I'm in therapy now, doing the real work of becoming someone who doesn't destroy everything he touches. It's slow. It's hard. Some days I can barely get out of bed, and other days I manage to take out the trash or answer an email or eat a meal without crying.

But I'm trying.

The words hit different now that I understood them. I was in therapy too. I knew what trying looked like—the unglamorous daily work of showing up, of facing things you'd rather avoid, of slowly, patiently building new patterns over the wreckage of old ones.

We were both resurrection plants, I realized. Both of us had been dried out, curled in on ourselves, looking for all the world like things that couldn't possibly survive. And both of us were slowly, carefully, adding water. Unfurling. Remembering how to be green.

Lego tells me you're trying too. That you're healing. That you've found people who care about you and work that makes you happy and a life that doesn't revolve around unavailable artists who don't deserve your attention.

I'm glad. I'm so glad, Est. You deserve all of it.

I set down the letter and wiped my eyes. The tears had come despite my best efforts—not the devastating tears of breakdown, but something gentler. Release tears. The kind that came when you'd been holding something tight and finally let it go.

If you never want to see me again, I understand. I'll respect that. But if someday, when we're both further along in whatever healing looks like, you wanted to have coffee or just... talk... I'd like that. Not to go back to what we were—I know that's not possible, and I'm not sure it would be healthy anyway. But maybe to become something new. Something that doesn't hurt either of us.

Thank you for seeing me, even when I couldn't see myself.

Thank you for trying, even when I made it impossible.

Thank you for being the hands that hold the rose.

—William.

I read the letter twice.

Then a third time.

Then I set it down on the table next to the painting and stood there, staring at both of them, trying to make sense of what I was feeling. It wasn't what I'd expected. I'd expected to feel... something. Anger, maybe, or the return of that obsessive wanting that had consumed me for so long. I'd expected to feel destabilized, thrown back into the chaos of before, all my hard-won healing undone by a single letter and a painting of my own hands. But that wasn't what happened.

What I felt, instead, was something quieter. Something almost like peace.

He was sorry. He saw what he'd done. He was working on himself, trying to become someone different, doing the slow and unglamorous labor of healing that I understood intimately because I was doing it too. It didn't erase what had happened. Didn't undo the pain, the humiliation, the nights I'd spent wondering if I was fundamentally unlovable. The progress he was making now didn't retroactively justify the damage he'd done then. But it meant something.

It meant people could change. It meant the version of William who had screamed at me in his studio wasn't the final draft. It meant growth was possible even for people who seemed determined to destroy themselves and everyone around them. I didn't call. Didn't text. Didn't show up at his penthouse demanding closure or offering forgiveness. I just sat with the letter and the painting and the complicated feelings they'd stirred up.

The chamomile tea had gone cold in my cup, but I drank it anyway. Outside, the city was settling into night—lights flickering on in distant windows, the particular hum of Bangkok winding down after another day of relentless motion. The resurrection plant sat on my desk, its leaves fully unfurled now, green and alive. When Lego had given it to me, it had looked like something you'd throw away—a brown husk, curled tight, utterly defeated. But I'd added water. Day after day, I'd given it what it needed. And now here it was. Living. Growing. Proof that things that looked dead could learn to be alive again.

Maybe that was the message. Not just from the plant, but from all of it—the letter, the painting, the whole complicated tangle of what William and I had been and what we'd become.

Some things could be saved. Some wounds could heal. Some people could change.

It didn't mean you had to go back to them. It didn't mean the damage hadn't happened, or that the scars would ever fully fade. It just meant that endings didn't have to be permanent. That growth was possible. That the version of the story you were living right now wasn't the only version that would ever exist. I left the letter on my desk and got ready for bed. The apartment felt different now—not heavier, but fuller. Like something had been completed that I hadn't realized was incomplete.

Tomorrow, I would decide what to do with all of this. Tomorrow, I would figure out whether I wanted to respond, whether I wanted to see William again someday, whether there was a way forward that didn't hurt either of us. But tonight, I just slept. And for the first time in a long time, I dreamed not of storms, but of gardens.

I woke with tears on my face, but they weren't sad tears. They were the kind that came from relief. From the particular joy of realizing that what you'd been terrified of losing had never really been at risk. From understanding, finally, that you were safe. The morning light filtered through my curtains, soft and golden, painting stripes across my floor. I lay there for a moment, just breathing, letting the realization settle into my bones.

I had survived it.

Not just the supermarket encounter with my parents. Not just the breakdown with William. But all of it—the years of conditional love, the rejection that had sent me spiraling, the patterns I'd developed to cope with never being enough. I had survived it, and I was still here, and I was becoming someone new. Someone who drank flower tea and watered resurrection plants and let himself be met at bus stops by people who cared.

I got up, made tea—rose petal today, good for sadness and also for sweetness—and stood by the window watching the city wake up.

Somewhere out there, William was doing the same thing. Taking his medication. Facing another day. Trying. Somewhere out there, Lego was preparing for a performance he didn't want to give, carrying weight that wasn't his to carry, building fortresses of soft things against a world that kept asking him to be strong.

Somewhere out there, Hong was putting finishing touches on paintings that would show the world who he really was—vulnerable and brave and willing to be seen. Somewhere out there, Tui was probably already at the studio, opening up, making space for the work and the people who would come through.

And here I was.

In my apartment that was finally a home. Drinking flower tea. Looking at a painting of my own hands holding something beautiful.

Not broken anymore. Not desperate. Not chasing storms.

Just here. Just present. Just alive.

The letter sat on my desk, still folded, still waiting. I would reply eventually. When I was ready. When I knew what I wanted to say. When the words had time to find their shape. For now, I just drank my tea and watched the light change and let myself feel grateful for all of it—the pain and the healing, the loss and the finding, the ending and the beginning.

The hands in the painting were holding a rose. And I was learning, finally, to hold myself with the same care.

The response came to me in pieces throughout the day. Not a grand declaration. Not forgiveness wrapped in pretty paper. Just the truth, laid out simply, the way you'd offer water to a drought-stricken plant—not too much, not too fast, just enough.

That evening, after the sun had set and the city had shifted into its nighttime rhythm, I sat down at my table with my phone in hand. The painting watched from its place on my desk. My hands. The rose. Evidence of attention I hadn't known I was receiving.

I typed slowly, choosing each word with care.

The text sat on my screen for a long time before I sent it. I'd typed it, deleted it, typed it again. Changed words. Removed sentences. Added them back. The particular agony of trying to say something true without saying too much, of offering acknowledgment without opening doors I wasn't ready to walk through.

In the end, I kept it simple:

Received your letter. Thank you for the honesty. The painting is beautiful. I'm not

ready to talk yet. Maybe someday. But I wanted you to know it meant something. Keep leaving the apartment. Keep trying.

— Est

I read it three times before sending. Made sure it said what I needed it to say—acknowledgment without invitation, kindness without obligation, hope without promise.

Then I pressed send and set down my phone. The response came faster than I expected—maybe twenty minutes later, when I was washing my tea cup and watching the morning light shift across my kitchen floor.

Thank you, Est.

No demands. No attempts to push for more. Just gratitude for what I'd been able to offer. That was growth too, I realized. The William of before would have seized any opening, would have flooded me with words and feelings and the particular intensity that had drawn me in and then overwhelmed me. This William—the one doing the work, the one in therapy, the one learning to take out the trash—this William knew how to receive without grabbing.

Maybe that was what healing looked like. For both of us.

I stared at the message for a long moment. Then I set my phone face-down on the counter and finished washing my cup.

That was enough for today. That was more than enough.

Somewhere in that sea of light was a penthouse where a painter was learning to leave his apartment.

Somewhere was a flower shop where a boy arranged beauty out of chaos.

Somewhere was a tattoo studio where artists marked skin with permanence and meaning.

Somewhere was a university where paintings hung on walls, waiting to be seen.

And here, in this apartment, was me.

Holding a cup of flower tea. Looking at a painting of my hands holding a rose. Feeling something that might have been hope, or might have been peace, or might have been something too new to name yet.

The question had never been whether to forgive William. Forgiveness was its own journey, with its own timeline, and I wasn't sure I was there yet—wasn't sure I needed to be.

The question was whether I could accept a beautiful gesture without letting it pull me backward.

And the answer, I was discovering, was yes.

I could receive the painting without returning to the obsession. I could read the letter without reopening the wound. I could acknowledge his growth without abandoning my own.

I could hold these things gently, the way the hands in the painting held their rose.

Some things were worth keeping even when they came from complicated sources. Some apologies deserved to be received even when you weren't ready to respond. Some doors could stay open a crack without you having to walk through them. Tomorrow was another day—more work on the campaign, more texts from friends, more of the ordinary, beautiful business of being alive. I wanted to end on this: the particular quiet that came from completion. From having faced something difficult and come through it intact.

The painting stayed on my desk, next to the resurrection plant. My hands and a rose, rendered in gray and blue and red. Evidence of attention. Evidence of care. Evidence that even in his worst moments, William had been watching—had been seeing me in ways I hadn't known I was being seen.

It wasn't the love story I'd imagined.

But it was something.

The days that followed had a particular quality to them—not dramatic, not transformative, but quietly different. Like someone had adjusted the lighting in my apartment by a single degree, enough to notice if you were paying attention, not enough to startle. The painting stayed on my desk, next to the resurrection plant. I'd considered moving it—putting it in a drawer, hanging it on a wall where it would become background, finding some way to diminish its presence. But every time I thought about relocating it, something stopped me.

It wasn't that I wanted to look at it constantly. It was that hiding it felt like hiding from myself. Like pretending the past hadn't happened, instead of integrating it into whatever I was becoming. So the painting stayed. And every morning, when I sat down to edit photos or organize my schedule, I saw it: my hands, holding a rose, rendered by someone who had been paying attention even when I thought he wasn't. The reminder was complicated. But complicated wasn't the same as bad.

Dr. Siriporn's office was the same as always—the beige walls, the careful art, the particular quiet of a space designed for excavation. I'd been coming here for weeks now, long enough that the ritual had become familiar. Check in at reception. Wait in the small anteroom. Get called back. Sit in the comfortable chair across from her



careful attention.

"So," she said, settling into her own chair, "tell me about the letter."

I'd mentioned it—briefly, in passing, the fact of its arrival without the content of its words. She'd let it sit, knowing I'd bring it back when I was ready.

I was ready now.

"He apologized," I said. "Really apologized. Not the kind where you say sorry and expect everything to be fixed. The kind where you actually see what you did and name it."

"How did that feel?"

The question was so simple. The answer was anything but.

"I expected it to destabilize me," I admitted. "I thought—if William ever actually acknowledged what happened, if he ever said the things I'd been wanting him to say, it would pull me back. Undo everything I'd built. Make me want to go back to him."

"And did it?"

"No." The word came out with a small laugh—surprised, almost. "It didn't. I read his letter, and I felt... peace. Closure. Like a door I'd been trying to close for months finally clicked shut."

Dr. Siriporn nodded slowly. "What do you think changed? Between the you who would have been destabilized, and the you who felt closure?"

I thought about the question. About the weeks of therapy, the conversations with Tui and Hong, the day at Lego's apartment surrounded by soft things. About the resurrection plant unfurling on my desk and the flower tea I drank every morning and the way I'd learned to water myself instead of waiting for someone else to do it.

"I think..." I started, then stopped. Tried again. "I think the old me needed his acknowledgment to feel valid. Needed him to see me in order to believe I was worth seeing. But now—now I already know I'm worth seeing. I've got people who show me that every day. So his acknowledgment is nice, but it's not... essential. It's not the foundation I'm standing on anymore."

"You've built a different foundation."

"Yeah." I smiled, small but real. "I have."

We sat with that for a moment. The quiet of understanding settling between us.

"There's something else," I said. "Something I've been thinking about."

"Go on."

"He's in therapy now. William. He's doing the work—really doing it, from what Lego tells me. And I'm glad. I want him to heal. But I also—" I paused, trying to find the right words. "I also realized that even if he heals completely, even if he becomes the person he should have been all along, that doesn't mean we should be together."

"Why not?"

"Because healing isn't about undoing the past. It's about becoming someone different going forward. And the person I'm becoming... I don't think he needs what William has to offer. Not anymore. Maybe he never did—maybe what I wanted from him was never about him at all. Maybe it was about proving something to myself."

Dr. Siriporn's expression was gentle. Encouraging. "What were you trying to prove?"

"That I was worth loving." The words came out quieter than I expected. "That someone as brilliant and complicated as William could see me, really see me, it would mean—I don't know. That my parents were wrong. That being gay wasn't the unforgivable thing they made it out to be. That I deserved to exist."

The silence that followed was heavy. Full.

"And now?" Dr. Siriporn asked.

"Now I know I deserve to exist regardless of who loves me. I know my parents were wrong, not because William saw me, but because I see me. Because Tui sees me. Because Hong and Lego see me. Because there are people who show up and treat my existence like it matters, and I'm learning to believe them."

I paused, something clicking into place.

"That's why the letter brought peace instead of chaos," I said slowly, the realization unfurling like the resurrection plant on my desk. "Because it wasn't telling me anything I didn't already know. It was just... confirmation. External confirmation of something I'd finally started believing from the inside."

Dr. Siriporn smiled. "That's significant growth, Est. Do you recognize how far you've come?"

"Sometimes." I looked at my hands—the same hands William had painted, the same hands that held cameras and tea cups and the thread of my own life. "And sometimes it still feels fragile. Like I could slip back at any moment."

"What do you do when it feels fragile?"

"I water myself," I said. "I drink the tea. I talk to people who care about me. I show up for work. I do the small, unglamorous things that keep me growing instead of

curling back in."

"That's exactly right." Dr. Siriporn leaned forward slightly. "Healing isn't about reaching a destination where everything is fixed. It's about building practices—rituals, routines, connections—that support you even when the foundation feels shaky. You're doing that. You're living that."

I nodded, feeling the truth of it settle into my bones.

"There's one more thing," I said. "About William. About what comes next."

"Tell me."

"I texted him. After I read the letter. Just—a short message. Acknowledging what he'd said. Telling him I wasn't ready to talk but maybe someday."

"How did that feel?"

"Necessary." I considered the word. "Not because I owed him anything. But because leaving it completely unanswered felt like... like I was still hiding. Still running. And I'm trying not to run anymore."

"What do you think 'someday' looks like?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "Maybe coffee, like he suggested. Maybe just occasional texts. Nothing romantic—I know that's not where this is going. But maybe... maybe something like, An understanding. A willingness to witness each other's healing without needing to merge again."

"That sounds very mature."

"It sounds exhausting," I laughed. "But also right. Like the complicated thing is actually the true thing, for once."

Dr. Siriporn smiled. "The complicated things usually are."

That night, I went home to an apartment that felt warmer than it had before. The painting was still on my desk. My hands, holding a rose. William's apology rendered in oil and pigment. But it didn't dominate the space anymore. It was just one element among many—the resurrection plant, fully green, reaching toward tomorrow's light. The photographs I'd hung on the walls. The tea collection from Lego. The ticket to Hong's exhibition, stuck to my refrigerator with a magnet.

Evidence of a life I was actively building instead of just surviving.

I made myself dinner—actual dinner, not takeout or instant noodles, but vegetables and rice and something that required actual cooking. I ate at my small table, looking out the window at the city lights, thinking about nothing in particular.

Tomorrow would bring more work. More therapy. More of the small, unglamorous labor of becoming someone I could respect.

The day after would bring Hong's exhibition. Watching him be brave. Being part of the crowd that witnessed his vulnerability and met it with warmth.

The days after that would bring Lego's performance. Watching him dance through grief, surrounded by people who had chosen to fill the seats left empty by loss.

And somewhere in all of it—maybe soon, maybe not for a long time—there would be a conversation with William. Coffee, like he'd suggested. Or just a text. Some small acknowledgment that we had both survived, were both still surviving, were both learning to be different than we'd been. Not going back. Just... acknowledging the shared journey.

I washed my dishes. Watered my resurrection plant. Got ready for bed.

The letter from William was still on my desk, next to the painting. I picked it up, ran my thumb across the folded paper, feeling the weight of his words even though I wasn't reading them.

Then I opened my desk drawer and placed the letter inside. Not throwing it away. Not forgetting. Just putting it somewhere safe, where it could exist without demanding my attention. Where it could be part of the past instead of dominating the present.

The painting I left where it was. A reminder that I had been seen. That I was worth seeing. That someone had paid attention, even when I didn't know they were looking. But I didn't need the painting to believe that anymore.

I believed it because I had learned to see myself.

I believed it because I had people who showed me, every day, that my existence mattered.

I believed it because I was alive, and growing, and unfurling toward whatever came next.

The resurrection plant caught the last of the streetlight filtering through my curtains. Its leaves were green and full, reaching upward, doing the slow and patient work of being alive. I understood now what Lego had meant when he gave it to me. Some things that look dead are just waiting. Just dormant. Just needing the right conditions to remember how to grow.

I had been waiting. And now I was growing.

Tomorrow, I would keep growing.

And the day after that.

And every day after that, for as long as it took.